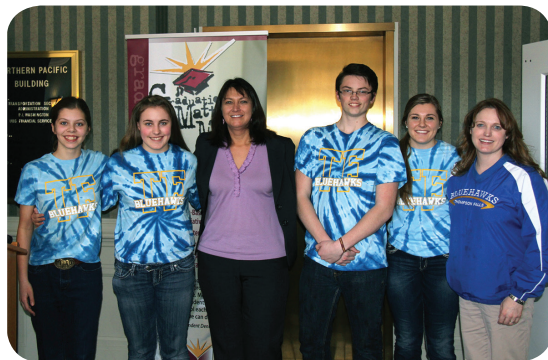


Graduation Matters Montana - Student Assistance Foundation College Readiness Fund 2013-2014



Preparing students for college and the workforce is a central goal of Graduation Matters Montana (GMM). In addition to academic preparedness, many students in Montana struggle with the cost of higher education. Over the past two years, Graduation Matters Montana and the Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) has partnered to administer the GMM-SAF College Readiness Fund. The goal of the fund is to increase the number of Montana students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as well as provide college application assistance to students and their families.



Superintendent Denise Juneau with Thompson Falls High School students, and High School Counselor Jodi Morgan.

In 2013, SAF provided \$50,000 to the fund to support twelve Graduation Matters Montana communities. Communities employed a variety of strategies and partnerships to meet their goals to increase FAFSA completion and college applications. The results of their efforts are highlighted in this summary report. GMM encourages all schools to learn key lessons from each other and to continue to prepare our students for their college or career goals.

Overview

The goal of the GMM-SAF College Readiness Fund is to support local Graduation Matters Montana initiatives' efforts to: (1) increase the percentage of high school seniors who submit the FAFSA by March 1, 2014; and/or (2) increase the percentage of Montana high school seniors who enroll in college the fall after high school graduation. These are two of the outcomes identified in SAF Strategy Plan, FY 2013 – 2016.

- All grantees stated that funding helped create and sustain the framework of the projects they have implemented. Without the grants flexibility they wouldn't have been able to be successful and expressed a desire to see funding be available in the 2014 – 2015 school year.
- Schools enjoy working with SAF staff. SAF happily partnered on and worked closely with local projects and expanding school districts' knowledge of the services and supports SAF can offer.

- In October 2013, twelve Graduation Matters communities were awarded grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000 to increase the number of students who complete the FAFSA by March 1, 2014.
- Schools who received the grants achieved an average 35 percent FAFSA completion rate, which was well above the state average of 30 percent, and all schools increased their FAFSA completion rate. Specifically, the percentage of FAFSA complete rates ranged from 29 percent to 58 percent.
- Schools coordinated College Application Week and College Goal Montana activities to help meet their FAFSA goals. OPI developed an innovative tool, the “Sample Checklist for Student Outreach”, which was used by several grantees and helped staff focus on targeted outreach to students. In addition to phone banks, grantees used automated phone messages, Facebook pages and communication programs that facilitated texting and other message services.

Results

Innovative practices were implemented to increase FAFSA completion and college awareness.

These included:

- **Anaconda** (44% FAFSA completion rate) hosted College Application nights and a FAFSA filing event. College Preparation Coaches assisted students through the college application and FAFSA filing process. With the support of local colleges, businesses and the military, Anaconda High School hosted a college and career Transition Day for graduating seniors.
- **Bozeman** (43% FAFSA completion rate) offered monthly college readiness activities to engage more students. Specifically, they hosted a Health Science fair that allowed students to understand the educational requirements of different careers in the medical field.
- **Browning** (36% FAFSA completion rate) participated in College Goal Montana and Application week activities by working with existing college and career readiness programs such as SAF, TRiO, GEAR UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search.
- **Columbia Falls** (29% FAFSA completion rate) had a laptop giveaway incentive that students could qualify for if they completed their FAFSA and college application. The media outreach they did helped increase the awareness and purpose of that incentive.
- **Eureka** (33% FAFSA completion rate) had great success at their FAFSA information and assistance night. They offered scholarships to encourage attendance and provided dinner to the parents and students.
- **Great Falls** (29% FAFSA completion rate) created a FAFSA filing incentive program. The program rewarded students who had completed and submitted their FAFSA. Ten students won a small scholarship that could be used for college application fees or other college and career related expenses.

Efforts resulted in \$2.7 million in additional federal college grants for Montana students and families.

- **Hardin** (41% FAFSA completion rate) hosted two weeks of College Application Week events and had 11 college representatives assist students in completing their applications. The high school hosted four financial aid for parents. High school students provided day care for parents with young children.
- **Hot Springs** (58% FAFSA completion rate) hosted parent and student financial aid nights and a special FAFSA filing night. They provided information on the importance of graduation and college cost comparisons. The promotion and awareness increased attendance and knowledge.
- **Libby** (36% FAFSA completion rate) partnered with the Flathead Valley Community College-Lincoln Campus to kick off their College Goal Montana event. School staff was trained by SAF to provide FAFSA assistance to students. All Libby High seniors completed a college application during College Application Week.
- **Livingston** (40% FAFSA completion rate) coordinated several activities to create school and community awareness of college preparation, including a "scholarship smack down" event which included the local Park County Community Foundation, local media stories, classroom discussions, and a special early release day for seniors.
- **Missoula** (38% FAFSA completion rate) had success calls to students who requested help. The individual conversations around the entire process were more convenient, but positively effective. They also utilized automated phone calls to prompt parents to attend family financial aid sessions. They had 50% increase in attendance.
- **Thompson Falls** (44% FAFSA completion rate) had students complete a college application as part of an English class lesson. The support and convenience that was provided in the classroom helped increase their application completion rate.



We appreciate this partnership:

Graduation Matters Montana helps foster effective partnerships at the local and state level – partnerships that enrich the discussions and the strategies employed to ensure more Montana students graduate from high school ready for college and the workforce. The work also relies on sharing effective strategies and tools throughout the state. Indeed, GMM's tagline is "Locally designed, locally implemented, based on what works in Montana." The GMM-SAF College Readiness Fund is a critical strategy to increase the efficacy of college enrollment efforts in Montana.

The OPI is deeply appreciative of its partnership with the Student Assistance Foundation. We look forward to continuing to learn and grow in our shared work. For more information, please feel free to contact Deborah Halliday at 406-444-3559 or dhalliday@mt.gov.